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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Tuesday, January 26, 1937

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

Another Tuesday. And, seems to me, more letters and questions than ever. And it looks like gentlemen first today. On the top of the mail-pile is a note from a gentleman-listener in Bismarck, North Dakota, who sends in a helpful hint about popcorn that is too dry to pop. He was listening when we read that letter from the lady who had a lot of corn that seems to have "no pop in it." Perhaps you remember that we suggested allowing the dry grains of corn to stand a few days in a tight fruit-jar with a little water. That's one way to give corn the required moisture for popping. Well, our gentleman-friend writes of an even quicker way to add moisture. He says he pours hot water over the corn, and that then it is usually ready to pop at once. He also says that he believes most of the bulk popcorn on the market would pop better with some added moisture.

Now to answer a questioner who is worried about his rhododendron bushes. He writes that he spent great effort getting these bushes established around his house only to have several badly damaged during last winter. He wants to know how to protect them against winter injury.

I have referred this letter to our radio garden-advisor, W.R.B., who replies that so-called "winter injury" to such broad-leaved evergreens as rhododendrons, evergreen-azaleas, laurel, and so on might better be called "early-spring injury," for the strong sunshine and high winds of late February and March often do much more injury than the cold weather. The plants usually suffer from lack of moisture at this season. When the ground is frozen and moisture is not available through their roots, wind and sunshine may cause too much evaporation from the leaves. Then the leaves try to adjust by curling up to reduce this loss of moisture. Curled leaves, you see, have less surface exposed to sun and wind. But when the moisture is withdrawn too much or too quickly, the leaves become dry and brown and so-called "winterkill" is the result.

When plants are winterkilled they really die of thirst rather than cold. One way to protect evergreens against this trouble is to give them plenty of water in the fall before the ground freezes. And then if a good warm midwinter thaw sets in, you can soak the ground around the roots of these plants thoroughly and that drink should tide them through until the spring rains.

Another way to care for these evergreen bushes is to give them some protection against winter wind and sun. You can put up a windbreak of evergreen boughs or a screen of cornstalks. Protect the exposed side of the bush especially. Burlap and boards or any kind of brush also will help against wind. As for protection against the drying winter or spring sun, you can use a burlap canopy, or a shed without sides, or, for small plants, inverted baskets and boxes.

To guard against too much evaporation of the soil and also to protect the roots against the disasters of alternate thawing and freezing, a blanket of leaves -- mulch, as the gardeners call it -- is a great help. Leaves are Nature's protection for trees and plants. So is a layer of snow on the ground. In fact, French gardeners call snow "poor man's manure" because it is such a protection. But very heavy snow -- the weight of it -- may permanently injure evergreens. So after each storm, you'll be wise to shake it from your evergreen trees and bushes before it has a chance to freeze. Many a beautiful and valuable boxwood tree has been broken down by snow. You may be interested to know that each winter Government caretakers in Washington, D. C., place neat little green wood "snowsheds" over the beautiful box-bushes growing around the Lincoln Memorial Building and in the gardens at Mount Vernon.

"Why are the leaves of my Christmas plants all dropping off?" asks another listener.

"Probably because your house is too hot and dry," suggests W.R.B. Most steam-heated houses and apartments nowadays are too dry and too hot for plants raised in the moist temperate air of greenhouses. In our homes plants have to contend with so much that doesn't agree with them. They suffer from dust and soot on their leaves which clogs up the pores. They suffer from lack of sunlight -- so little filters in the soiled panes of city windows especially. They may suffer from gas fumes from furnaces or gas stoves. But most of all probably they die from dry hot air. Also many a house plant gets a fatal chill from windows that are opened on it at night so that the plant is allowed to burn and dry by day and freeze in a wintry breeze by night.

As W.R.B. often says, both house plants and human beings would probably be in better winter health if homes were kept less hot, if we arranged somehow to keep more moisture in the air, to have purer air, and if more of the rays of the sun reached indoors. Pans of water on radiators help put moisture in the air. So does a steaming kettle on the stove. A temperature of 65 degrees indoors will keep your plants alive much longer than one of 85. And frequent sponging of the leaves of plants will remove the dust that has much to do with their winter ills.
